Part One

Monday, August 18, 2003

Twin adoptees search for their Korean roots

By COURTNAY PEIFER
SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER REPORTER

My sister and I were orphans. Somber identical twins, our names pinned to our cotton dresses as fragile as hope.

"You looked so scared," says Mom, recalling her first impressions of photos the adoption agency sent to her and Dad. "That's what I remember -- that and I fell in love right away."

Family Tree, American: See a recent photo of Courtnay Peifer's American family, along with a short biography of each member. (appendix A1)

It's been 25 years since death and poverty conspired to change my fate and that of my sister. A quarter-century filled with opportunity and laughter since two 3 1/2-year-old Korean girls became Americans in the heartland of Minnesota.

And now, that is how I will return to the land of my birth, as an American -- as a foreigner.

I will return to connect with a forgotten culture, and to find the grave of my birth father, whose death triggered an avalanche of events, and to find what I can about the three older siblings who remained behind.

I will search for a family of Kims.

Kim, Lee and Park, the most common surnames, have ancient origins and account for 40 percent of Korea's population. It is not like looking for a needle in a haystack. It is more like trying to find three specific grains of sand in the Gobi desert.

Family Photo

Kim Jong Soon and Kim Jong Sun, photographed in an orphanage in Seoul, were given up for adoption by their family after their father died and their mother abandoned the family. They are now Lindsay and Courtnay Peifer, searching for their roots in a land they barely knew.

I do not remember my older sister's name. But I have the names of my two brothers, gleaned from school records. We will search in Seoul, a city of about 13 million people -- a search that could expand to 48 million people in a nation known for its homogeneity, a nation in which only about 250 surnames exist.

Finding home

I was born Kim Jong Sun, which means gold, comfort and goodness. It is a wish for my future.

My sister Lindsay was born Kim Jong Soon -- gold, comfort and mildness.

As children, Lindsay was quick to cry and I hurried to catch her tears. She was -- and still is -- quick to laugh, an explosive, corruptible sound like bursting champagne. She is feisty and fiery and witty, a marathon away from mildness.

Perhaps Minnesota, with its extremes of cold and hot weather, shouldn't be expected to raise mildness. Goodness perhaps, but certainly not mildness.

Minnesota is where I arrived in 1978, with only the gold pantsuit set and sneakers that I was wearing -- purchased with money sent by my new parents.

Family Photo

Bob and Dar Peifer get to know their daughters, whom they name Lindsay and Courtnay. Also pictured is their sister Ashley, adopted in 1976, and a cousin.

At 3 1/2, it was my sixth placement, but this is where I would stay, where I would find a home with real parents and another sister, Ashley, who was adopted from Korea in 1976. Parents who would each spend two hours every night before bed tending my lice and impetigo, a skin disease, and Lindsay's ear infection and mites; who endured the current events tests I drilled on them after scavenging the newspaper when I was 5; who cheered and applauded after impromptu concerts that Lindsay, Ashley and I would give, sometimes on roller skates and always off key.

My biological father died Dec. 30, 1976, after he was bitten by a snake. My adoption records say my biological mother then abandoned all five of her children -- ages 2, 5, 9, 12, -- with my father's younger brother, who was married and had his own children. He kept us for a year, but couldn't afford all of us.

He brought the two youngest to a babies' home in hopes for a better life for us. The orphanage sent us to an adoption agency, which placed us with a foster mother while we waited for a permanent home.

Family Photo

Courtnay and Lindsay take a spin at Como Park in Minneapolis, Minn.

A few months later my sister and I landed at Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport with a dozen or so other

Korean adoptees. The terminal lights were shocking after hours spent sleeping in a dim airplane. I remember cameras flashing and video cameras and everywhere a sea of legs. And noise.

Adoptees were carried in the momentum of the crowd of new parents surrounded by relatives and friends. Many of the adoptees had medical issues, the worst being a girl whose new parents discovered -- through her shrieks and tears -- that she had a broken arm.

"I found one," called Mom, scooping me up in her arms. "Can anyone see the other one?"

"Which one do you have?" Dad asked Mom.

"I think I see the other one," Mom's brother said.

What I remember most is that I was tired. I curled up in my new mother's arms, not yet knowing who she was, but somehow knowing she was safe. I pretended to sleep so I could nestle in her arms, the sheltering weight of her hand cradling my head.

Moments later, the interpreter told me that this was my new mother. I looked at the woman holding me and hugged her. I fell in love right away.

When my Dad, who was holding Lindsay, thought he should get to know me and let my Mom get to know Lindsay, I refused to budge.

I had found home and I wasn't letting go.

Family Photo

New citizens Lindsay, Ashley and Courtnay display their new flag in 1979.

The quest

I moved to Seattle last year, but still think of home as my parents' dining room table in the St. Paul suburb of Apple Valley. That's where hot games of Scrabble unfold, where discussion about the legacy of feminism and the future of politics are debated over pots of coffee, where Dad eats his morning toast and tells stories in a slow rhythm that end in the funniest punch line you've heard since his last story.

While I don't expect to find a home in Seoul, I wonder whether the soil will feel familiar, an artifact to a cultural amnesiac. Will the shards of images that I retain translate into a language of memory?

I have spent years, even as they have collected as incremental steps toward my inevitable journey back to South Korea, cautioning myself that I may not be able to find my relatives or they may not want to be found.

I started looking for them 3 1/2 years ago. I've contacted Children's Home Society of Minnesota, which handled my adoption. They would forward my request, but just one case worker processes all such requests at Eastern Child Welfare Society, the Korean adoption agency. Children's Home warned that it may take two years just for my file to advance to the top of the pile.

Family Photo

Days after their arrival, Courtnay and Lindsay collect grass from their yard.

I've met with a consul and the consul general at the Korean Consulate in Seattle. Both said they were eager to help press my inquiry through formal channels.

Lindsay looked into appearing on a Korean television show during which adoptees tell their stories in the hopes that a family will recognize them.

I've looked on the Internet. I investigated buying a "seeking-family" ad in Korean newspapers.

But sometimes a code breaker arrives in an unexpected place. Sometimes it takes only three hours for someone to change your life.

Short Takes: The story of an age

Think getting older is tough? Try gaining two years in one. Here's the tally:

I'm 28. According to the Western calendar, I was born Feb. 7, 1975.

According to the lunar calendar, I was born Dec. 27, 1974. OK, still 28.

However, in Korea, two things happen. First, the clock starts ticking at age 1. That makes me 29. Second, while the lunar calendar is observed, birthdays aren't. Everyone jumps a year, regardless of actual birthday, on Jan. 1.

Thus, this December, I will technically turn 30 on the lunar calendar according to Korean bookkeeping and still be considered 28 in the United States. However, I won't officially be considered 30 in Korea until Jan. 1.

But a month later, I'll turn 29 again in the United States. And then turn 31 at the end of the year in Korea.

So when some people talk about turning 30 over and over again, I actually do -- three times.

-- Courtnay Peifer

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Their mission was to adopt Korean orphans

Holts were moved to act, changing a nation in the process

By COURTNAY PEIFER
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Harry and Bertha Holt took a personal mission and inspired a nation.

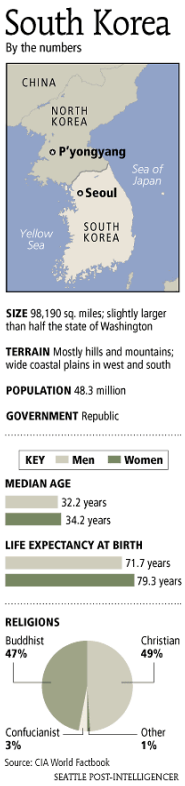
After building a fortune in lumber, farming and commercial fishing, the Oregon parents of six were so moved after watching a documentary about Korean War orphans that they decided to adopt eight of them.

But international adoptions were nearly unheard of in 1955. While Harry Holt went to Korea, Bertha Holt lobbied Congress, which passed the Holt bill, allowing them to adopt the children.

The children's arrival brought media attention, which sparked families nationwide to seek Korean children. Many were called "dust of the streets," biracial with U.S. military fathers stationed in Korea during the war.

As the Holts were creating Holt International Children's Services to help other American families adopt Korean children -- eventually 60,000 -- the South Korean government began formalizing the adoption process overseas, something that was culturally unheard of before the 1950-53 war. Before then, any adoptions usually occurred within the family line.

Over the next several decades South Korea became the largest supplier of children to developed countries.



What started with the adoption of war orphans morphed into a system that became the primary social policy for children abandoned by impoverished families in the 1950s and 1960s.

In a reflection of changing social norms, most adopted Korean children in the 1970s and 1980s came from single mothers just as more Americans were having abortions and gaining access to more reliable birth control methods.

About 200,000 South Korean children have been adopted overseas with the vast majority -- 150,000 -- by American families. The other 50,000 have been adopted by families in Canada, Australia, Switzerland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, France, Germany and Luxembourg.

In Washington state, World Association for Children and Parents has placed more than 2,000 children since 1976.

Children's Home Society of Minnesota, the state's main adoption agency for Korean adoptees and which handled our case, has given families to 8,000 such children in the past 30 years. Holt International, based in Eugene, Ore., operates nationwide, including in Minnesota. Holt placed 339 children in 2001 nationwide, Children's Home Society places about 150 in Minnesota and western Wisconsin a year.

South Korea began to face international pressure to reform its social welfare programs to create domestic safety nets for its children and not rely on international adoptions. In its peak year, nearly 9,000 children were adopted overseas in 1985 alone. By 1993, that number had dropped to fewer than 1,800. The government mandated that overseas adoptions cease by 1996, but social and economic challenges prompted a softening of the policy and foreign adoptions started to increase after 1997.